

VZCZCXRO2658
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHDIR #0124/01 0771243
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181243Z MAR 09
FM RPO DUBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0369
INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI PRIORITY 0303
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RUEHDIR/RPO DUBAI 0370

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000124

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/18/2019
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRAN: RELIGIOUS MINORITIES COMPLAIN OF IRIG DISCRIMINATION

DUBAI 00000124 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Director, Iran Regional Presence
Office, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: The IRIG has engaged in a distinct effort to separate minorities from the larger, Muslim society, according to members of Iran's Zoroastrian and Armenian Christian communities who recently spoke to IRPO. Iran's efforts, seemingly intended to ensure that Iran is first and foremost a country for Muslims and that Muslims do not convert to other religions, have limited the minorities' engagement with the broader society. And although minorities reported few instances of overt discrimination from their countrymen, the IRIG's effort has had its consequences, including: emigration, economic disadvantage, and psychological hardship. The minorities dismissed the importance of their Majles representatives, were generally uninterested in the June presidential election, and pessimistic that their situation would soon improve. End Summary.

12. (C) IRPO officers spoke separately with two Armenian Christians and two Zoroastrians in late 2008 and early 2009. Of the Armenian Christians, one lives in Tehran and owns a pizza restaurant while the other emigrated from Iran and lives in the UAE. Of the Zoroastrians, one lives in Shiraz and formerly chaired a Shiraz council of Zoroastrians, and the other is a housewife in Tehran.

Keeping Minorities "In a Box"

13. (C) Since the Revolution, Iran's religious minorities have perceived that the IRIG has set about separating the religious minorities from the majority, Shia population. The Zoroastrian from Shiraz explained that Iran now is first and foremost a country for Muslims and religious minorities are constantly reminded of this reality. For instance, all Zoroastrians carry a card identifying them as Zoroastrians. Minority-owned restaurants have to be identified as such so Muslims can avoid eating there, if they choose. The Zoroastrian housewife recounted a time when her son accompanied a Muslim friend into a mosque and thereafter received a letter instructing him to never do so again. Religious minorities are also pressured to prevent Muslims from converting. The Zoroastrian from Shiraz said this pressure was the only overt interference from the government. As a result, they turn away all Muslims curious about their faith.

14. (C) The IRIG's employment restrictions are another element of the religious minorities' separation from the broader society; these restrictions also cause emigration from Iran. The Zoroastrian housewife said Zoroastrians cannot become teachers or work in the military. Additionally, she assumed that all government jobs were unavailable to Zoroastrians, though she was not sure. Her son immigrated to the US because he could not find work in Iran. The Armenian Christian from the UAE said the poor economic prospects drive many minorities away from Iran.

15. (C) Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians' official recognition in the Iranian constitution does afford the minorities certain rights, such as the right to practice their religion, elect their own representatives to the Majles, and manage their own "personal affairs and religious education." In practice, constitutional recognition does confer some privileges unavailable even to Muslims. An Armenian Christian sports club, for instance, creates a "normal space" where men and women can socialize, women can be unveiled, and boys and girls can swim in a pool together. But these protections often reinforce their separation from the Muslim majority. The sports complex further "isolates" Christians from the Muslims. Armenian schools use Armenian rather than Farsi and at home Armenians also speak their own language, resulting in a distinct accent when they speak Farsi, according to the Armenian Christian living in the UAE.

16. (C) Despite the regime's efforts, contact between the religious minorities and Muslims does continue, and the minorities reported few instances of discrimination from their countrymen. The Armenian Christian pizza restaurant owner said 90% of his customers are Muslims—who, amusingly, rarely hesitate

DUBAI 00000124 002.2 OF 002

before ordering pork-based toppings for their pizza—but some do avoid the restaurant because it is run by non-Muslims. (Note: Our contact said he acquiesces to such request for pork toppings but under no circumstances would he serve alcohol. He said the punishment for serving alcohol would probably be a fine, six-month restaurant closure, and flogging.) The Armenian Christian living in the UAE claimed that just as many (possibly more) people eat at Armenian restaurants as a means of rejecting the government's attempt to isolate the community as choose to avoid the establishment for the same reason.

Pessimistic about the Future

17. (C) Our interlocutors were pessimistic that the conditions they face in Iran would change; they generally dismissed the importance of their representatives in the Majles and expressed little enthusiasm for the June presidential election. The Zoroastrian from Shiraz complained that their Majles representative has little influence and that it was almost expected that he remain silent. The Armenian Christian restaurant owner echoed the same point. An acquaintance of Gevork Vartan, an Armenian Christian Majles member, said Vartan is trying to broaden his participation in general Majles activities to show that Armenian MPs can represent Iran and Iranians, not just the small Armenian Christian community.

18. (C) Iran's June presidential election also held little interest; even with former president Khatami in the mix. Although he had not yet declared his candidacy at the time of

the conversation, the Zoroastrian housewife was not supportive of Khatami, explaining that he had not accomplished anything in his eight years as president. The Armenian Christian restaurant owner said he does not vote at all—a decision he described as a silent protest against the IRIG. Of our interlocutors, only the Zoroastrian from Shiraz planned to vote. And he votes, he said, out of fear the government will punish Zoroastrians if they do not participate in the election. He offered a similar explanation for why he never speaks out against the injustices he sees—he doesn't want to create more trouble for Zoroastrians.

Similarly, leaders of the Armenian Christian community encourage voting in parliamentary election because they fear that if Armenian Christians do not participate, the IRIG will strip them of their Majles seats.

Comment:

19. (C) The Zoroastrian and Christian populations in Iran face fewer problems than Baha'is—a point our interlocutors were quick to make themselves. And in many respects, the minorities' problems are not unique but are instead shared by all Iranians. Iranians of all stripes face economic challenges and emigrate to find better economic opportunities. Iranians generally are also pessimistic about the future and do not expect to benefit from increased freedom or political rights with the current regime in place. Still, the minorities are not on equal footing with their Muslim counterparts. The minorities have fewer avenues for employment and the IRIG has pushed the minorities to the side in favor of Shia Muslims. But rather than push for greater rights and greater acceptance from the IRIG, the minorities have turned to silent protest and assimilation to avoid making their situation worse. And many simply leave Iran. The Armenian Christian in the UAE said the most important factor motivating emigration is the sense that "Iran is paralyzed" and thus offers no opportunity or hope to young people. The lack of hope—the sense that life is simply harder for minorities in Iran—was a constant refrain. The minority populations will likely continue to dwindle via emigration or otherwise. With an air of bitter resignation, the Armenian Christian restaurant owner explained that he and his wife do not have children because they do not want to raise kids in Iran's Muslim-first society.

ASGARD